



ENGAGING AL-SHABAAB IN SOMALIA:

MILITARY FAILURES AND THE MERITS OF DIALOGUE

Afyare A. Elmi



People watch outside of destroyed Hayat Hotel after a deadly 30-hour siege by Al-Shabaab jihadists in Mogadishu on August 21, 2022. (Photo by Hassan Ali ELMI / AFP)

The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and its international partners have been fighting against Al-Shabaab for the last 17 years. Despite Mogadishu sharply escalating its efforts since 2022, it has failed to defeat the group. since 2022, these efforts have failed to defeat the group. Al-Shabaab, for its part, seeks a total military victory against Somali authorities, but this too has failed.

As early as 2012, it became evident that a military victory would not resolve the conflict.¹ However, both sides' persistence in a militarized approach has added years to a ruinous conflict in one of the world's poorest countries. Considering these complex dynamics, this policy note argues that, instead of continuing to seek an elusive military victory, it is time for the government of Somalia to explore dialogue with Al-Shabaab.

Countering Al-Shabaab: Federal Government Strategy

Since 2007, the Somali government's approach towards Al-Shabaab has focused on military campaigns supplemented by counterinsurgency tactics. Under former President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, the government pressed on with efforts to defeat Al-Shabaab; subsequent administrations, including those led by President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, during his first term, and his successor President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, continued the military campaign against Al-Shabaab.

In May 2022, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud was re-elected. At the time of his election, several clans in central Somalia resisted the group's attempt to control their territories. The president stepped up the war against Al-Shabaab by supporting these clans. More clans in the Galmudug and Hir-Shabelle regions joined the government's combat efforts, prompting President Mohamud to declare a full-blown war against Al-Shabaab (militarily, financially, and ideologically).² The first phase of the campaign would focus on regions east of the Shabelle River (the Galguduud, Hiran, Middle Shabelle, and Mudug regions north of Mogadishu), while the second would focus on areas to the river's west and south of the capital (Bakool, Bay, Gedo, Lower Juba, Lower Shabelle, Middle Jubba).

Tactical adjustments aside, the government's core strategy of seeking a military victory, coupled with rhetoric of openness to negotiation, has remained consistent in recent years. However, under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's current tenure, the government has sent mixed signals. First, Mohamud's government declared a comprehensive war, refusing to negotiate with Al-Shabaab, which it, alongside its main international partners, most notably the United States, designates as a terrorist group. More recently however, the president has alluded to the conflict eventually ending

through negotiations and has indicated a willingness to engage in talks when conditions are favorable. Then in June of 2024 at the Oslo Forum in Norway, President Mohamud announced that Somalia was ready to talk to Al-Shabaab, although without indicating that it had taken any action towards that end.³

The Case for Dialogue: Why Negotiate Now?

William Zartman's "ripeness theory" posits that parties to a conflict seek a resolution when each realizes that the situation has reached a "mutually hurting stalemate," meaning that a military victory is impossible and a continuation of the conflict serves neither side.⁴ Thus, each party concludes that the time is "ripe" for negotiations, considering it the only possible avenue to end conflict.⁵

Many scholars and practitioners have concluded that Somalia's government should explore ways to negotiate with Al-Shabaab.⁶ Yet despite the heavy human and material costs, Mogadishu has not fundamentally changed course. Although the government has rhetorically claimed it is open to negotiation, it has yet to show much interest in actively pursuing talks. The government maintains its designation of Al-Shabaab as a terrorist group and demands that the group renounce violence, break ties with Al-Qaeda, and halt its attacks on civilians. Mogadishu also continues to stress that the group must be defeated militarily.

Al-Shabaab, for its part, has yet to demonstrate a serious interest, at least publicly, in negotiations. The group demands the implementation of Shariah law and the withdrawal of African peacekeeping forces as pre-conditions for any talks. Over the last 17 years, Al-Shabaab has only become more entrenched and more deadly,⁷ competing with the state in the security and justice sectors. It has also collected taxes and extorted money from cities and along major supply routes.⁸

In response, since Mohamud's return to power, the Somali government and allied clans have fought against Al-Shabaab, while key international security partners provide material and air support. While the group suffered heavy losses in the Galmudug and Hir-Shabeelle regions,⁹ it denied the government a military victory in these regions, let alone Al-Shabaab strongholds in southern Somalia. The government's expectation that it can defeat Al-Shabaab alone, or even with foreign military support, therefore remains questionable. Moreover, the slow pace of the government's territorial gains and the difficulty of holding the territories it has captured point to a prolonged and costly conflict, with no immediate prospect for a military resolution.

Some argue that the departure of foreign forces could potentially threaten a full Al-Shabaab takeover of Mogadishu, akin to the case of the Taliban in Afghanistan. However, there are several notable differences between the groups. Unlike the Taliban, a Hanafi group with national goals, Al-Shabaab is Salafist, internationalist, and openly Al-Qaeda-affiliated. It also lacks significant international backing and faces regional opposition. Al-Shabaab's survival is therefore more a testament to the government's weaknesses than its own strength.

Geographically, Somalia's landscape does not favor insurgent warfare, further diminishing the likelihood of a total Al-Shabaab victory. The group may continue to defend territories it holds and exert control through intimidation and extortion, but an overwhelming defeat of the Somali government or major tribes is improbable. Somaliland, Puntland, and major clans in Galmudug and Hirshabelle have expelled Al-Shabaab from their territories without much support from African Union forces, demonstrating the group's limitations.

Taken together, these factors suggest that Zartman's moment of "ripeness" may have arrived. Ending the conflict through negotiation would also save many lives. Over the past 17 years, tens of thousands of Somalis with no connection to the rivaling parties have been killed by explosions or in violent confrontations.

Ending the conflict peacefully will therefore spare more lives and protect the country's remaining infrastructure, reasons that should compel the Somali government to initiate dialogue.

Al-Shabaab's refusal to allow international organizations to operate in areas under its control, and Western restrictions on agencies working in the same regions,¹⁰ further highlight the importance of dialogue in addressing the humanitarian crisis in Somalia. For decades, the country has been ravaged by both floods and droughts. In 2011, more than 250,000 people died as a result of the latter.¹¹ Tens of thousands more Somalis perished between 2016-2017 and 2021-2022, partly due to the conflict and drought.

Were the conflict to end through dialogue, Somalis and the international community could collaborate to mitigate the humanitarian crisis in the country. In 2023, The United Nations (UN) reported that nearly eight million people, or half of the population, required urgent humanitarian assistance.¹² Many of these are internally displaced, residing in camps within major cities, while most are in the countryside, where aid is difficult or impossible to access.

Launching a Dialogue Process

Negotiating a peace deal after 17 years of war would present complex challenges. However, many of the conditions for a successful deal are attainable. A negotiation process could begin with the involvement of a credible, third-party mediator trusted by both of the conflicting parties.¹³ One option is Somalia's traditional elders,¹⁴ who have previously mediated between the government and Al-Shabaab figures.¹⁵ These efforts were primarily carried out by individuals from the same clan who had chosen to leave Al-Shabaab. The challenge of mediating at the organizational level or with a trans-clan faction seeking reconciliation with the government would however present a different level of complexity. Moreover, Somalia lacks

a unified body of clan elders capable of mediating between the government and Al-Shabaab.

Other options for a mediator include state parties, notably Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Norway, and Finland.¹⁶ Qatar and Türkiye have already expressed interest in such a role at various times. Doha's role in talks between the Taliban and the United States prime it to play a leading role given its experience in mediating a conflict involving armed non-state actors. Riyadh could also serve as a credible mediator, given its unique regional leadership position.

As a second step, the international community, particularly Mogadishu's security backers, must publicly endorse dialogue with Al-Shabaab as a component of broader peace-building objectives. As critical stakeholders, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union must support the dialogue. Historically, the counter-terrorism policies of these nations, particularly those of the United States, have deterred the Somali government from considering negotiations as a serious option.¹⁷ The international community generally supports peaceful conflict resolution among Somali political actors (clans, regions, and political groups). However, when addressing the extremist group, there has been a notable preference for supporting a total military victory by the government.

Thirdly, clarity is needed on the key factors impeding a negotiated settlement. Al-Shabaab insists on the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Somalia and the full implementation of Shariah law.¹⁸ It is notable that as early as 2009, Somalia's parliament officially announced that it would integrate Shariah law into the constitution.¹⁹ Moreover, the constitution, developed with the assistance of the UN's Political Office, is Shariah-compliant.¹

The international community has negotiated with the Somali government for peacekeeping forces to leave the country by December 2024.²⁰ However, Somalia may continue to require foreign security assistance, as the state is not yet prepared to assume full se-

curity responsibilities.²¹ Recently, the government discussed maintaining a significant security force,²² potentially through bilateral agreements with other countries, indicating that Al-Shabaab's demands may not be fully met even after the withdrawal of the African Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) forces.

Key Challenges in Dialogue

For negotiations between the government and Al-Shabaab to succeed, five challenges must be addressed. First, securing the will of the leadership from both parties is crucial. Engaging Al-Shabaab's leadership poses security risks for the mediators involved. To address this issue, negotiations could first focus on mid-ranking leaders.²³ In a study of mid-ranking Al-Shabaab commanders, the majority of members interviewed expressed interest in talks.²⁴ While targeting mid-level leaders may yield partial success, engaging the top leadership with incentives such as amnesty, political positions, or relocation to a third country could be more effective.

The second challenge is that global, regional, and national developments over the past five years have influenced the parties' calculations of achieving a military victory. In order to be brought to the negotiating table, leaders on both sides need to be convinced that a military victory is not achievable. In 2023, the UN Security Council lifted a 31-year-old weapons embargo on Mogadishu, enhancing the government's access to weapons.²⁵ Additionally, Somalia has signed strategic partnerships with Eritrea, Ethiopia,²⁶ the United Arab Emirates, Türkiye, and Egypt, as well as receiving debt relief. All this has raised its expectations of a military victory against Al-Shabaab. Yet despite external support, the government has achieved minimal success in its efforts, since 2022, to expel the group from the east of the Shabelle Rivers. In other words, these gains may lead to short-term success, but it will not lead to a sustainable government victory in the long run.

i. Article 2 of Somalia's Constitution, as of 2012, has three sub-articles, and the third sub-article stipulates that "No law can be enacted that is not compliant with the general principles and objectives of Shari'ah."

Conversely, Al-Shabaab may derive encouragement from the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan. However, a full Al-Shabaab takeover of Somalia is unlikely. The successful resistance against Al-Shabaab by Somaliland, Puntland, and various clans in Somalia is instructive in this case. The group attempted to attack Puntland in 2017, but was defeated.²⁷ Clans in Hiiran, Galgadud, Mudug, and Middle Shabelle have also defeated the group militarily at different times. In other words, while Al-Shabaab has proven that it can resist the government's attacks, it cannot decisively defeat the federal government or regional government.

The international community's reluctance to encourage dialogue with extremist movements represents a third challenge. Notably, the government's security partners, the United States and Ethiopia, have shown hesitance in negotiating with Al-Shabaab, unable to conceive of the group as a political party or legitimate security actor in the country. A number of Al-Shabaab leaders have also quit the movement and joined the Somali government—some taking on major political and security positions.²⁸ For Mogadishu to engage with Al-Shabaab, it will need the support of its security partners. For instance, even though Somalia threatened to expel them, Ethiopian troops are deployed in multiple locations in Somalia as part of the ATMIS.²⁹ The position of the United States is also important as Washington is a critical political and economic supporter of Somalia.

Fourth, Al-Shabaab's allegiance to Al-Qaeda, its ideological commitment, and its mass killings of innocent civilians all challenge the prospect of dialogue. While some experts argue that negotiation with terrorist movements is often necessary to end conflicts,³⁰ Al-Shabaab's affiliation with Al-Qaeda further complicates negotiations since many international and domestic actors maintain their staunch opposition towards negotiating with Al-Qaeda. However, in some contexts, negotiating with belligerents is desirable.³¹ In fact, the wider political conditions and circumstances have arguably transformed Al-Shabaab's leadership, gradually replacing its ideological leanings with increasingly political goals.

A final challenge lies in the renewed tensions between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa. In October 2023, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed declared Ethiopia had a right to access the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. To that end, he signed a Memorandum of Understanding, in January 2024, with President Muse Bihi Abdi of the breakaway region of Somaliland, under which Ethiopia would get access to 20 kilometers of coastline for its navy, in exchange for diplomatic recognition of Somaliland and a share in Ethiopian Airlines.³² While landlocked Ethiopia's desire to become a coastal state is not new,³³ Abiy's recent decisions sent shockwaves across the region.

Al-Shabaab is likely to take advantage of this situation by positioning itself as the defender of the nation. It is notable that when Ethiopia invaded Somalia in late 2006, Al-Shabaab was a somewhat marginal group, but the invasion increased its popularity among young Somalis. Abiy's current stance may provide another opportunity for Al-Shabaab.³⁴ While Ethiopia has sent troops to Somalia to combat the group, its actions undermine the Somali government's efforts by creating instability. This works in favor of Al-Shabaab, which has already expressed its firm opposition to the Ethiopia-Somaliland deal.³⁵

Conclusion

Despite 17 years of concerted efforts by the government of Somalia and its supporters to defeat Al-Shabaab militarily, the extremist group has persisted. On the other hand, Al-Shabaab has also failed to overthrow the government. After years of a bloody stalemate that has taken many innocent lives, there is an urgent imperative to undertake a thorough reassessment of prospects for engaging Al-Shabaab through dialogue and negotiations.

Despite numerous challenges, various avenues exist for engaging Al-Shabaab. Crucially, the success of these efforts will require the engagement of a trusted mediator and support from Somalia's backers and allies. Policymakers should therefore seriously consider the option of negotiations aimed at ending a conflict that has already taken many lives and inflicted a humanitarian disaster on one of the world's poorest regions.

ENDNOTES

1. Afyare Elmi and Abdi Aynte, "Negotiating an End to Somalia's War with al Shabaab," *Foreign Affairs*, February 7, 2012, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/somalia/2012-02-07/negotiating-end-somalias-war-al-shabaab>; Afyare Elmi and Abdi Aynte, "Somalia: The Case for Negotiating with al-Shabaab," Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, February 20, 2012, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2012/02/201222072248106446.html>.
2. Abdifatah Ismael Tahir, "Al-Shabaab and the Limits of Ma'awisley – State-Sponsored Vigilantism," *PeaceRep* (blog), September 12, 2024, <https://peacerep.org/2024/09/12/al-shabaab-and-the-limits-of-maawisley-state-sponsored-vigilantism/>.
3. Khader Aweys, "President Hassan delivers a keynote speech at the 2024 Oslo Forum," SONNA, June 11, 2024, <https://sonna.so/en/president-hassan-delivers-a-keynote-speech-at-the-2024-oslo-forum/>.
4. William I. Zartman, "Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond," in *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War*, eds. Paul Stern and Daniel Druckman, (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2000).
5. Ibid. See also William I. Zartman, "The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments," *Contemporary Peace-Making: Conflict, Peace Processes and Post-War Reconstruction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008).
6. Elmi and Abdi, "Negotiating an End.": Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, "Building Peace from the Margins in Somalia: The Case for Political Settlement with Al-Shabaab," *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 4 (February 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2018.1429751>; Mohammed I. Shire, "Dialoguing and Negotiating with Al-Shabaab: The Role of Clan Elders as Insider-Partial Mediators," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 15, no.1 (December 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2020.1863099>; Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile, "Al-Shabaab Attitudes Towards Negotiations," in *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab*, eds. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (London: Hurst, 2018).
7. Christopher Anzalone, *The Resilience of al-Shabaab*, Analysis Paper, (New York, United States: Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, April, 2016), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-resilience-of-al-shabaab/>; Afyare Elmi and Ruqaya Mohamed, "Violent Non-State Actors in Somalia: al-Shabaab and Pirates," in *Violent Radical Movements in the Arab World: The Ideology and Politics of Non-State Actors*, ed. Peter Sluglett (London: I. B. Tauris Publishing, 2019).
8. Paul Williams and Afyare Elmi, *Security Sector Reform in Somalia*, Report, (Mogadishu, Somalia: The Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, January, 2023), <https://heritageinstitute.org/security-sector-reform-in-somalia-challenges-and-opportunities/>.
9. Mohamed Gabobe, "Al-Shabab in Somalia: Bullets and bombs can't bury ideologies," *Al Jazeera*, October 6, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/10/6/al-shabab-in-somalia-bullets-and-bombs-cant-bury-ideologies>.
10. Ibid.
11. Daniel G. Maxwell and Nizar Majid, *Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) 2011-12.
12. UNICEF, *Humanitarian Action for Children: Somalia*, (New York, United States: United Nations, 2023), <https://www.unicef.org/media/131931/file/2023-HAC-Somalia.pdf>.
13. Barbara F. Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).
14. Linnea Gelot and Prabin B. Khadka, "Traditional Authorities as Both Curse and Cure: the Politics of Coping with Violent Extremism in Somalia," *Conflict, Security & Development* 24, no. 1 (February 12, 2024) <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2024.2310317>.
15. Shire, "Dialoguing and Negotiating with Al-Shabaab."
16. Elmi and Aynte, "Negotiating an end."
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. "Parliament approves introduction of sharia law," *France 24*, April 18, 2009, <https://www.france24.com/en/20090418-parliament-approves-introduction-sharia-law->.
20. "Security Council Extends Authorization of African Union Transition Mission in Somalia until 31 December, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2478 (2024)," UN Press, August 15, 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15793.doc.htm>.
21. Williams and Elmi, *Security Sector Reform*.
22. "Somalia asks peacekeepers to slow withdrawal, fears armed group resurgence," *Al Jazeera*, June 20, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/20/somalia-asks-peacekeepers-to-slow-withdrawal-fears-armed-group-resurgence>.
23. Botha and Abdile, "Al-Shabaab Attitudes."
24. Ibid.
25. "UN Security Council to vote to end Somalia arms embargo after three decades," *Al Jazeera*, December 1, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/1/un-security-council-to-vote-to-end-somalia-arms-embargo-after-three-decades>; Michelle Nichols, "UN Security Council lifts arms embargo on Somalia government," Reuters, December 2, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-security-council-lifts-arms-embargo-somalia-government-2023-12-01/>.
26. "Somalia and Ethiopia sign MOU on defense cooperation," *FTL Somalia*, December 8, 2023, <https://www.ftl.com/somalia-and-ethiopia-sign-mou-on-defense-cooperation/>.
27. Harun Maruf and Abdulaziz Osman, "Heavy losses reported as Somali Puntland forces repel Al-Shabab Attack," *Voice of American News*, June 8, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/somalia-puntland-al-shabab-attack/3892123.html>.
28. Abdi Sheikh, "Somalia appoints al Shabaab co-founder as religion minister," Reuters, August 2, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/somalia-names-former-al-shabaab-spokesperson-minister-2022-08-02/>.
29. "ATMIS lauds Ethiopian troops for restoring peace in the Hiiran region," African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), August 22, 2024, <https://atmis-au.org/atmis-lauds-ethiopian-troops-for-restoring-peace-in-hiiran-region/>.
30. Jonathan Powell, *Talking to Terrorists: How to End Armed Conflicts*, (London, The Bodley Head, 2014).
31. Ibid.
32. Rytis Beresnevičius, "Somaliland obtains stake in Ethiopian Airlines after granting Ethiopia sea access," Simple Flying, January 3, 2024, <https://simpleflying.com/somaliland-stake-ethiopian-airlines-sea-access/>.
33. Nuruddin Farah, "Which Way to the Sea, Please?" *Horn of Africa* 1, no. 4 (1978).
34. Afyare Elmi and Yusuf Hassan, "The Coming War Nobody Is Talking About," *New York Times*, August 25, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/26/opinion/ethiopia-somalia-conflict.html>.
35. Caleb Weiss, "Shabaab says it rejects Red Sea access deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 2, 2024, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/01/02/shabaab-says-it-rejects-red-sea-access-deal-between-ethiopia-and-somaliland/>.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Afyare A. Elmi is a nonresident senior fellow at the Middle East Council for Global Affairs. He is also a research professor at the City University of Mogadishu and a senior research fellow at the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies in Somalia. Previously, Elmi was the executive director of the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies in Mogadishu. Prior, he was an Associate Professor of Security Studies at Qatar University's Gulf Studies Program. Elmi's research interests include conflict, security, and peacebuilding/state-building in Africa and the Middle East.

The author would like to thank the ME Council's research and communications teams for their continued support.

ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

The Middle East Council on Global Affairs (ME Council) is an independent, non-profit policy research institution based in Doha, Qatar. The ME Council produces policy-relevant research, convenes meetings and dialogues, and engages policy actors on geopolitical and socioeconomic issues facing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The ME Council serves as a bridge between the MENA region and the rest of the world, providing a regional perspective on global policy issues and establishing partnerships with other leading research centers and development organizations across the MENA region and the world.

MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Saha 43, Building 63, West Bay, Doha, Qatar

www.mecouncil.org

Copyright © 2024 The Middle East Council on Global Affairs

The Middle East Council on Global Affairs is an independent, non-profit policy research institution based in Doha, Qatar. The Council gratefully acknowledges the financial support of its donors, who value the independence of its scholarship. The analysis and policy recommendations presented in this and other Council publications are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the organization, its management, its donors, or its other scholars and affiliates.